

THE CONVERSATION

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Yetis, Yowies and dinosaur trees: amazing finds in the hunt for living legends

Bill Laurance

Distinguished Research Professor and Australian Laureate at James Cook University

You might think the idea of a Yeti is far-fetched, but don't tell that to Oxford University Professor Bryan Sykes - or to the locals in Australian towns like Kilcoy and Woodenbong.

Sykes created a global frenzy when he recently announced that the Yeti might well exist. His analyses were based on two hair samples collected 800 miles apart in the Himalayas.



Woodenbong at sunrise: could a Yowie really be lurking in the surrounding woods? Flickr/gaw101 (Greg Wilson)

When he analysed the DNA in those hairs, he found they perfectly matched the DNA of an ancient polar bear. According to Sykes, this could mean the polar bear is alive and kicking in the high Himalayas today. Those who claim to have seen the Yeti describe it as shaggy, bipedal and very shy, and Sykes reckons his ancient bear fits the ticket.

People who study legendary creatures such as the Yeti or its Australian equivalent, the Yowie, are called cryptobiologists. They run the gamut from mainstream scientists to fringe types claiming to have been attacked by giant man-eating plants or kidnapped by aliens.

But while the creatures they're searching for can seem far-fetched, we shouldn't dismiss cryptobiologists as cranks - because in their search for living legends, they have uncovered some amazing lost creatures.

Yowie spotting in Australia

Accounts of Yowies by Europeans hark back to 1876, when a report of an "indigenous ape" appeared in the *Australian Town and Country Journal*. Yowies were soon being seen in abundance. One enterprising chap even offered to capture a Yowie for the Australian Museum for 40 pounds sterling.

Since then, eastern Australia has been peppered by Yowie sightings. Yowies, it's been claimed, have attacked dogs, frightened gold miners and wandered into cities.

In 2010, a man in Canberra reportedly spotted a “juvenile Yowie” in his garage. He said it was hairy with long arms and was definitely trying to communicate with him. Presumably he didn’t confuse it with his teenage son.

Some in the small farming town of Kilcoy, northwest of Brisbane, claim that the Yowie lives to this day in the mountains surrounding them. They even have a wooden statue of a Yowie and their very own Yowie Park.

Not to be outdone, people living in and around the northern NSW town of Woodenbong have been Yowie spotting since the 1890s. Two alleged sightings in the 1970s prompted scientists to investigate the reports, but the women who made the claims were mocked and since then there have only been whispers of further sightings.

Monsters in our midst

I encountered the Yowie legend in the 1980s while doing fieldwork for my PhD in the rainforests of the Atherton Tableland, in far north Queensland. The newsagent in a local village told me, in great seriousness, about a giant ape-like creature that decades earlier had chased a logger in the rainforest of the

nearby Maalan area. The logger was so frightened, she said, that he never set foot in the rainforest again — and the local legend of the “Maalan Monster” was born.

I spent quite a lot of time in the Maalan rainforest, often spotlighting alone at night. I never saw any monsters but I did startle a number of Lumholtz’s tree-kangaroos, which can make a tremendous racket when they plummet down from trees and then loudly bound away.

A bit perversely, I once hatched a plot with a colleague — an Aussie biologist who was leading some American university students on a spotlighting hike in the Maalan area — to reveal the Maalan Monster to the world. Our scheme was that I’d hire a gorilla costume and then roar across the track just in front of the students, before disappearing forever.

Alas, I couldn’t find a gorilla outfit anywhere, otherwise I reckon they’d be selling Maalan Monster burgers in the local takeaway to this day.

Cryptobiology and its discoveries



The Yowie statue in Yowie Park, Kilcoy, Queensland.

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While it's tempting to giggle occasionally, cryptobiologists have made many valuable discoveries. These include recent finds such as the Mindoro fruit bat (pictured right) and the Laotian rock rat — representing a completely new family of mammal — as well as so-called “Lazarus species” that were long presumed extinct. Examples of the latter include the coelacanth, okapi, Javan elephant and giant terror skink, among many others.



The Mindoro fruit bat, which has metre-long wings and was recently discovered in the Philippines. Used with permission from H.J.D. Garcia/Haribon Foundation

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Here in Australia, the mountain pygmy possum and Wollemi Pine are notable

Lazarus species. Nicknamed a “dinosaur tree”, the pine is the only known survivor of a plant family that was thought to have disappeared 200 million years ago. It was discovered in a deep, narrow canyon in 1994, just 150km from Sydney.

Some respected scientists have become very caught up in the search for legendary or putatively extinct species, which are known as “cryptids”.

Francis Crome, a former CSIRO biologist, spent considerable time trying to photograph a thylacine in north Queensland, following a reported sighting from an amateur spotlighting group.

Likewise, Aaron Bauer, an American herpetologist, once desperately searched the length and breadth of New Zealand after a local resident sent him a photo of a six-foot-long gecko, which according to Maori legend had once lived on the island. The photo, it turned out, was a practical joke by one of Bauer's New Zealand colleagues, a tale I recount in my book, *Stinging Trees and Wait-a-Whiles*.

Mysterious creatures

Perhaps the search for cryptids tells us something about ourselves. All of us — even including sober-minded scientists — enjoy a mystery and the search for the unknown.

And it's not as though nature has come even close to revealing all its secrets. It's currently thought, for instance, that less than half of the plant species in the Amazon have been scientifically discovered, and possibly just a tenth of the planet's insect species.

All this means we should probably keep an open mind about the world's biological mysteries.

And even if I actually think the Yowie legend is pretty dubious — just don't tell the folks in Kilcoy or Woodenbong that I said so.

Further reading:

DNA 'evidence' for Himalayan yetis doesn't bear scrutiny

Cryptozoology? No need for an apology

Media puts its Bigfoot in it Yeti again: it's abominable